

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH DR. ALI MEHDI JAWAD

AL-DABBAGH, SPOKESMAN, GOVERNMENT OF IRAQ (VIA TELECONFERENCE)

MODERATOR:

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BROOK DEWALT, OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, PUBLIC AFFAIRS

LOCATION: THE PENTAGON, ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

DATE: TUESDAY, MAY 15, 2007

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LT. CMDR. DEWALT: I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense blogger's roundtable for Tuesday, May 15th, 2007. My name is Lieutenant Commander DeWalt with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs, and I will be moderating our call today.

Today, we are honored to have as our guest from Iraq Dr. al- Dabbagh, spokesman for the government of Iraq. We are honored to have you today, sir. We thank you very much.

A note to our bloggers on the line today, please remember to clearly state your name and your blogger organization, and please respect Dr. al-Dabbagh's time and keep your questions succinct and to the point.

Sir, do you have any opening comments for the group?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Well my name is Ali al-Dabbagh. I'm spokesman of the Iraqi government. I welcome -- (off mike) -- who is joining us. And it will be my pleasure to join you and to answer any questions by any of those patriot persons around you.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Fantastic. Thank you, sir.

Let's begin with our first person, Mark Finkelstein.

Q Thank you. Dr. al-Dabbagh, it's Mark Finkelstein from NewsBusters. I had the privilege of interviewing you in your offices in Baghdad in November, and it's very nice to have the chance to speak with you again.

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Thank you. Welcome. Thank you.

Q At that time, you stated that a quick withdrawal by the United States from Iraq would be a -- the words you used were "a gift to the terrorists and create a very dangerous situation in Iraq." Just yesterday, I heard an interview with Dr. Ali Allawi, who, of course, as you know, was a former minister in the Iraqi government after the removal of Saddam. He is actually proposing a withdrawal of American troops in fairly short order, and he took the position that it would not create a civil war or other unmanageable events in Iraq.

Can I please invite you to respond to Dr. Allawi's comments?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Well, Dr. Allawi is a respected person, and he is -- he was the minister of trade and commerce here in Iraq. Dr. Allawi is giving his opinion. But we still think the Iraqi security forces need for the international troops because the fight is

beyond the capacity of the Iraqi troops, and the terrorists is not only targeting Iraq, it's targeting all the region and beyond that -- beyond the region even.

We feel there should be a timetable for building international security forces in order to be in a position to -- (off mike). We are working on a program to -- (off mike) -- governorates for many -- (off mike) -- and this is -- (off mike). (Off mike) -- of that -- the troops or the governorate and we feel that -- (off mike) -- several enemies which they are threatening all the region.

Q Thank you. Lieutenant Commander, I don't know about the others, but I'm finding the phone connection not to be that good.

Q Yeah, I heard almost nothing.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Correct. It's a difficult phone line.

Using the cell phone, we'll try to do the best I can. Did you have a follow-up?

Q I have a second question that -- why don't I invite some of my other blogger colleagues to ask their question? And hopefully there will be a second round.

Q Can you ask the doctor to repeat the first answer?

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Dr. al-Dabbagh?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Yes.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Would you be able -- I'm sorry, we have a little difficulty in hearing the response. Could you repeat your response if at all possible?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Yes, okay.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Thank you, sir.

MR. AL-DABBAGH: (Off mike.) He's definitely reflecting his own personal view. We feel -- (off mike). But here we feel that -- (off mike) -- now for building up the Iraqi national security forces and the timetable is being built to build up these security forces, and the threat here in Iraq is the threat of terrorist groups. And those terrorist groups not only threatening Iraqis. They are threatening -- (off mike). So we feel -- (off mike). We still need the support of the mission in strong forces, and in making the Iraqi forces ready and good, and be in the position to meet this threat and to combat this threat. (Off mike.)

Q Thank you, Doctor.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Thank you very much, sir. That second time it was still a little patchy. But I think we got more of that, so we do appreciate it.

The next person for a question, David Axe.

Q Sir, thank you for taking the time to speak to us. My name's David Axe. I'm with the Aviation Week Group. Can you hear me?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Yes, David.

Q I would like to ask you to comment on the refugee situation in Iraq, and the situation with Iraqi refugees in neighboring countries. Can you give me a sense of how bad it is and what the government is doing to alleviate the problem?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: The migration of the people of Iraq toward the neighboring countries is definitely -- (off mike) -- situation in the neighboring countries, especially Syria. The presence of those Iraqis, thousands of Iraqis, is not all bad to the neighboring countries. Take example in Jordan. In Jordan, those people who go to Jordan, Iraqis who go to Jordan, they are participating in upgrading the economy. They -- (off mike) -- economy of Jordan much more than -- (off mike). As far as -- (off mike) -- from what we have in Jordan compared with what we have in Syria, in Syria, those people who go there, they are seeking -- (off mike) -- a better situation, and especially so that they could come back. In Iraq, the government is taking its responsibility to -- (off mike) -- helping the Syrian government in their health care and education and anything those Iraqis need. But at the end, this is a problem being presented there since the time of Saddam, since we had -- (off mike) -- due to the -- (off mike) -- regime. (Off mike) -- in Syria. (Off mike) -- understand the difficulties and the problems associated with the presence of such around. We have 600,000 of Iraqis, more than 600,000 Iraqis in Syria, and those people need help.

And the Iraqi government is doing -- through the last conference in Geneva, from the United Nations, the Iraqi government declared its responsibility to help and support any effort -- regional effort or an effort, international effort provided by the United Nations, Iraqi government will be a major part in facing and taking that burden. Yes.

Q Thank you very much.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great. Thank you.

Next question from Andi.

Q Mr. al-Dabbagh, this is Andi Hurley with Andi's World and MilBlogs. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. I just wanted to ask you if you could give us a sense of the mood of the Iraqi people with respect to our presence there. Do they want us to stay or go? Are they optimistic about their future? And I'd also like to

know what you base your answer on. Do you do hard internal polling or just a sense from being on the ground there?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Andi, the line was failing. If you could -- I didn't understand it very well. Could you just shortly repeat it, your question?

Q Yes. Yes, sir. I'm just interested in if you could give us a sense of the mood of the Iraqi people with respect to the U.S. presence there. Do they want us to stay or go? And are they optimistic about their future? And I would love to know what you base your answer on.

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Yes. Now most of the political groups here they agree that a premature withdrawal for the troops, of the -- (world inaudible) -- troops in Iraq is not good for Iraq. And this means -- (inaudible) -- the whole situation with the (neighboring ?) country, with Saudi Arabia, with Jordan and with other countries, if you have a premature withdrawal, it might create a power gap, a power vacuum here in Iraq, and this may be filled by any other probably neighboring country. And this is now the idea of the most of the political groups here.

The differences here, that some of the groups, some of the political groups or Iraqis, they do ask for having a timetable, a timetable for withdrawal. Some of the political groups, they find that timetable is not wise right now and it is not good now to talk about the timetable for the withdrawal of the conventional troops, the timetable is for building up the security forces.

So the presence of the United States is -- most of the Iraqis feel that they had been liberated from Saddam by those troops, by the effort of the United States. This is -- nobody could deny this. But at the end, this is a democracy -- (inaudible) -- of expression. It is -- freedom of expression, some of the people they express their feelings by sometimes demonstration, the same way what you have in Washington, some of the people there are opposing the presence of the troops here in Iraq. But this is what we respected. If we compare this expression with the people who are resisting or insurgents, so definitely we do understand this expression as a peaceful expression when it comes to a demonstration, when it comes to a declaration, rather than using the violence way or violent way in expressing their feeling.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Thank you.

The next question comes from Andrew Lubin.

Q Yes, Doctor, good afternoon. This is Andrew Lubin from ON Point. In the past 10 months of the Maliki government, the oil-sharing arrangement still is being debated, the Sunnis are still complaining about being not brought into the government, and suddenly we've seen more suicide bombings in Kurdistan in the last week than in the

last several years. And then last week, the parliament voted that they want the Americans to leave. Why should we stay if we -- you know, what would you want to say to the American people that we should keep our troops in the country for an indeterminate period of time now if the parliament does not want us to stay?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Thank you, Andrew. First of all, let me correct what you had heard.

The parliament here in Iraq, in Baghdad, they didn't vote. There is a signature from 144 members; they had asked to put a timetable, not to ask them to leave.

Q Okay.

MR. AL-DABBAGH: And most of all -- (off mike) -- they put conditions. I mean, they didn't put a timetable -- they didn't put -- (off mike).

I saw the signatures of the members; most of them, they put -- (off mike) -- signatures that they set in a condition, and the conditions that the Iraqi military forces should be ready to take their responsibility. And this is at the end -- (off mike) -- timetable.

Let me make this clear. The presence of the military here, your military, American military forces here in Iraq, it is -- besides helping the Iraqis to build up their forces, they are helping the United States, they are helping the others, because the degree and the level -- (off mike) -- in Iraq from the terrorist group, as I said, it will -- (off mike) -- the capacity of the Iraqi forces to combat.

So we need an international force. I do agree that the United States is in the (middle role ?) in this effort. But we do believe the regional effort -- (off mike) -- will (reach ?) New York, as they had reached earlier New York and they threatened the United States. So the level of threat is not -- is beyond our capability to combat. Besides you are helping Iraqi people, you are helping yourselves as well because otherwise, we look at other side, you will find that this level of threat, it will affect the whole world. So it is an international community responsibility to limit down those groups and to defeat them here in Iraq and help the Iraqi security forces in order to get rid of -- (off mike).

Q Okay. Thank you very much.

MR. AL-DABBAGH: You're welcome.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Did we have anybody else call in? Did anybody not ask a question? Okay. Do we have any -- Dr. al-Dabbagh, do you have time for a couple more questions?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Yes.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great. Does anybody have a follow-up?

Q Yes, I do. It's Mark Finkelstein from NewsBusters.

Q All right, then I do after Mark does.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Okay.

Q Okay. Dr. al-Dabbagh, again, at the time that we spoke in Baghdad, you described Muqtada al-Sadr as having demonstrated some restraint, and you said, you know, that, like it or not, he is a political player. How do you look at his role at this point?

And on a related note, the United States has announced that it will undertake some conversations with Iran, and there are indications that your government encouraged our government to do that. What are your hopes or expectations coming out of those American talks with Iran?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: We feel that all the dialogue with the Iranians -- it will be for the benefit of the United States, it will be benefit of Iran as well, it will be benefit of Iraq, and then it will be benefit of all the region.

You look at (28 ?) years of conflict between the United States and Iran, it makes Iran more powerful. Now Iran is threatening the whole region with the nuclear issue. So conflict policy with Iran, it didn't get us any positive things. We have to try another way of dealing with Iran.

We feel in Iraq we are paying for all the -- (off mike) -- between Iran and the United States. Do we need to have a good relation with Iran? Definitely. They are our neighbors. Our -- (off mike) -- of border with them. On a basis that Iran should not -- (off mike) -- on Iraq issues. We will pay -- we Iraqis pay, we -- (off mike) -- more than 500 years because of the tension between the -- (off mike) -- and the Ottomans. And again we have during the (recent ?) years paying for all the problems -- (off mike) -- Iraq and the Iranians as well as now between the United States and the Iran.

So (at the end ?) there should be another policy on having Iran -- (off mike) -- the United States. We feel that there are a lot of issues -- (off mike) -- and the Iran. (Off mike) -- that they should sit and talk -- (off mike) -- Iraq. So at the end, we feel -- (off mike) -- dialogue between the United States and Iran about -- (off mike) -- to discuss any issues and problems between the United States and Iran.

Regards Muqtada al-Sadr, again, I understand that Muqtada al-Sadr is -- (off mike) -- and we have to dialogue with everybody. We have a dialogue with -- (off mike) -- need to accommodate everybody in Iraq in order to fix the problem and to solve all the problems arising from this political process.

Q Thank you, Doctor.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Thank you. And a follow-up question from Andrew Lubin?

Q

Yes. Doctor, Andrew Lubin again. I spent most of January, February and April in Anbar province and got to know the people from Sons of Anbar quite well. Sheikh Sattar complained bitterly that the Maliki government is a Shi'a government and is trying to squeeze Anbar and Sunnis out of the governmental process, that they're not sending the money, the aid, the assistance that the other provinces are getting. Can you comment on this, please?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Well, everybody, you know, there in Iraq, they support Sheikh Sattar and his other (guys/guides ?). This is known here in Iraq. This is known to the Al Anbar people. The Al Anbar council -- there's an Al Anbar council -- (off mike) -- is being headed by one of the normal member in the government.

And he know the volume and the -- I can't believe the amount that is being given to Sheikh Sattar and his colleagues. But definitely the government is -- without that support and the aid which government has sent to Sheikh Sattar and the tribes, they couldn't do what they have did now.

We feel that we do need to support -- (off mike). We do need -- what Sheikh Sattar and his colleagues did is much more than our security forces had did in Al Anbar. We feel that this model is going to be implemented even in Diyala. And now there is a great dialogue. There is a big dialogue with the tribes of Diyala to have the same model. But the people of Diyala themselves, they will stand against those terrorist groups. We've been supporting Sheikh Sattar and the other tribes as much as the government can do.

Q Sir, thank you very much.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Thank you very, very much.

Thank you all. We've had some great questions and comments today.

Dr. al-Dabbagh, do you have any final comments for the group before we conclude?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: I appreciate this. I'm happy to make myself -- (off mike). I am ready to join -- (off mike). And I appreciate all the colleagues which they had raised the questions, and I apologize if I didn't explain it very well. I hope that next time we could have more time and could have more dialogue.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Fantastic, we really do appreciate your time, sir. This has been fantastic.

This Bloggers Roundtable program will be available online at www.dodvclips.mil with an audio file, print transcripts and biography. The related story will be written for the American Forces Press Service and posted later today on the Department of Defense website, defenselink.mil. If there are any questions about this program, please contact Department of Defense New Media Team at bloggeroutreach@hq.afif.osd.mil. Or you can reach me, Lieutenant Commander DeWalt, at (703) 428-1204.

Again, thank you Dr. al-Dabbagh. We really appreciate it.

Thank you, blogger participants, and this concludes today's event. Thank you all very much.

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